

All the way back by elfrude

Category: Stranger Things - Fandom, mileven - Fandom

Genre: AU, Angst, F/M, Fluff, Fluff and Angst, M/M, Ship, Stranger Things AU, stranger things

Language: English

Characters: Eleven, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Byeler, Mike x Will, mike x eleven - Relationship, mileven - Relationship

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-01-11

Updated: 2017-10-15

Packaged: 2022-04-02 01:42:57

Rating: General Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 8

Words: 11,742

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

It's been nine years since El disappeared and everyone has tried their best to move on since. Mike Wheeler is back in Hawkins to celebrate Christmas with his family when something unexpected brings back the anxious memories from one eventful week in November, 1983. Will he be able to remain who he's tried so hard to become; or will his life completely change once again?

This is a Stranger Things AU fic. Will contain some angst, but don't worry. I'm here for the fluff.

1. "You're still awake?"

Hawkins, December 9th 1992.

There was something strange about being back in his childhood room that made it impossible for Mike to fall asleep. The sleeping girl next to him, however, had started breathing heavily the second she laid her head on the pillow and closed her eyes. He smiled at her. She never seemed to have any problems coming with him to visit his family in Hawkins; and why would she? She had absolutely no idea what had happened to him and his friends back when they were kids. He kind of envied her for that.

He turned away from his girlfriend, instead looking up at the ceiling; studying the bright, cold light cast by the full moon outside his bedroom window. Every time he was back to visit this place his mind seemed to find its' way back to November -83, keeping him from sleeping properly.

This night was no different. All though nine years had already passed, he remembered everything perfectly. He remembered his mother talking to Joyce Byers on the phone that morning. He remembered getting to school only to find Will wasn't there. Him, Lucas and Dustin had been puzzled. Will wasn't the kind of kid who'd skip school like that. In fact - he never had. After talking to Jim Hopper, the boys had bravely (or stupidly; depending on how you look at it) decided to start a search party; despite the fact that the chief had clearly told them not to. They sneaked out on their bikes in the darkness of the night; with rain cold as ice whipping at their faces as they went. He remembered his heart pounding in his chest, nervous from only being able to see a small area at the time from where the light on his flashlight hit the ground before of him.

And he remembered her; suddenly standing in front of them. Wet, frightened and alone. Her hair buzzed short and she was only wearing a yellow t-shirt obviously not made for her. A strange instinct had taken over him within a second- this girl needed to be taken care of. Somehow he had to protect her. So they brought her home to his house, hid her in his basement and from that moment

on- he was caught up on her. More and more so by the minute.

His eyes started watering at the memory of her. He sighed deeply into the night.

- "Oh, El..."

He missed her still.

The girl beside him took a deep breath before opening her sleepy blue eyes to look at him.

- "You're still awake?" she asked quietly.

- "Yeah..." he admitted. "You go back to sleep though, I'll be fine."

She gave him a look of concern. She knew about his childhood related insomnia; but even now, seven months into dating him, she still didn't know why. He wouldn't tell her.

- "Are you okay?"

He leaned over to softly kiss her forehead before nodding reassuringly.

- "I'm fine. I'll probably doze of any second."

She could tell he was lying, but had learned not to push him. He would only close up even more if she did.

- "Okay then." she said instead as she made herself comfortable, cuddling up next to him. "I love you, Michael."

He smiled slightly at his brown haired girlfriend. His eyes returned to the moonlight on the ceiling.

- "I love you too, Hannah."

Meanwhile, in a different part of Hawkins; another brown haired girl made her way through the night. She was tired; exhausted even- but kept a steady pace nonetheless. She had bags from sleep deprivation under her hazel eyes and her lips were dry and chapped. The clothes she was wearing, a grey hooded sweater and blue jeans, were too big for her (or rather; her undernourished body was too small for them), worn and slightly washed out. A small stream of blood had found it's way from one of her nostrils. Her head was pounding.

With the moon guiding her, almost like a headlight, she finally reached her destination. Her breath was heavy as she knocked on the door in front of her. No one answered. With what strength she had left- she knocked again, harder this time. A light suddenly got turned on from inside the house and heavy footsteps got closer and closer to the door. She had to hold on to the railing beside her by now, in order not to collapse on the spot.

A man in his late forties, maybe even early fifties, opened the door. His facial expression was gruff and annoyed at first, from being woken up in the middle of the night, but once he saw the broken girl in front of him he immediately softened.

- "Eleven?" he asked, shocked.

But before El could answer, her legs gave in and she fell unconscious to the ground.

2. "So you walked all the way back here?"

The next morning, El woke up on Hopper's couch to a very familiar smell. Standing in front of her on the coffee table was a cup of hot chocolate and a plate with her still favorite food in the world- eggos.

- "I thought that smell might wake you up." Hopper chuckled.

El was surprised. She smiled shyly.

- "How..." she started, looking up to the fairly handsome man (she noted) before her. "How did you know?"

- "It took a certain young boy several *years* to shut up about you." was all he had to say. El knew exactly of whom he was speaking.

- "Mike..." she breathed and Hopper nodded with a smile. He sat down beside her on the couch. A wave of anxiety washed over her. "Is he okay? Is he here in Hawkins? Can we go see him?"

- "Slow down, young lady." he said firmly. "I understand you're eager to see your friends, but I'm afraid you're not going anywhere until you explain to me what the hell is going on. Where have you been for the last... -what is it? *Nine years* now? If you're expecting me to just let you run off after you show up, in the middle of the night might I add, all exhausted with blood dripping from your nose- you couldn't be more wrong."

She let out a frustrated sigh as she nodded; she knew he was right.

- "So tell me." he continued, softer this time. "Tell me *everything*."

And she did. She told him how she hadn't been able to kill the monster back in the classroom that night, like everyone seemed to think, but instead after a long time (she didn't know exactly how long, since she hadn't had any sense of time as it was always dark in the Upside down) she finally did kill it and was able to find her way back to our dimension. She told him how "the bad men", as she still called them, found her passed out in Mirkwood and took her to another lab, in another town, about a two hours drive away from Hawkins. At first she'd refused to cooperate when they insisted on continuing their experiments on her. She shamefully looked down at her hands when she told him how she accidentally killed some of the guards who attempted to lock her up inside yet another isolation cell. Being free for just one week had changed her more than anyone could've ever imagined. Getting a small glimpse of normal life

seemingly made it impossible for her to stay locked up- so they quickly changed strategies. She was told that if she did not cooperate, her friends' lives would be short-lived. However, they also promised to reward her as long as she did as she was told. Heartbroken, she agreed to their terms.

Hopper was in shock. The fact that this girl had gone through hell and was still able to smile at the sight of something as simple as Eggos astonished him. The fact that she was still here, very much *alive*, astonished him even more. Had it been him who had to work for those disgusting people, he knew for certain he would've killed himself long ago. But she hadn't. Something, or *someone*, gave her the will to survive. She was stronger than he could ever wish to be. He laid a comforting hand on hers.

- "What kind of rewards?" he asked frowning.

She shrugged.

- "Books, movies, treats. After meeting Mike and the boys I just wanted to learn. Everything I thought I knew from growing up in the lab was-... what's the word- insufficient? I wanted to know things about the outside world; and doing what I was told was a way for me to access that knowledge." she explained. "They used my abilities in exchange for education."

He nodded slowly. It all started falling to place, but one big question remained;

- "How did you get out?"

She took a deep breath.

- "The entire time I was there, a man called dr Andersen was in charge. I'm not sure what happened to Papa, if he was killed by the Demogorgon or if they fired him. They never talked to me about anything." she explained. "All I know is that dr Andersen was in charge. He was a very cold and strict man, only interested in facts and results. Nothing like Papa, who at least *pretended* to care."

She paused. She always knew he'd been lying when he said he cared about her, but being in the same room as dr Andersen made her miss the lies. She took another a deep breath and continued:

- "Something happened about a month ago though and dr Andersen was taken off the project. Instead another man, dr Sawyer, was left in charge. Apparently he didn't like what they were doing to me in that lab, said it was inhumane. He must've had a lot of influence, because

just a few weeks later- I was let go. Just like that. They basically *threw me* out. They warned me about telling anyone though, saying they still kept a close eye on my friends. But I figured you already know about everything that happened before so...”

Hopper was speechless. First they kept her locked up, threatened her to obedience and then when the time for her release came- they threw her out like an unwelcome dog they no longer had any use for.

- “I had no idea where Hawkins was, since I wasn’t allowed out of the lab all those years, so getting here was hard. It took me a couple of days...” she admitted, embarrassed, with her eyes locked on her hands in her lap.

He didn’t know what to say, afraid that the rage he felt for how this wonderful girl had been treated would come pouring out- so he just embraced her. They sat like that for a while, in silence. Her chest was heavy, but she was still too tired to even cry. He broke the silence:

- “So... you *walked* all the way back here?”

She nodded, her face still buried in his warm embrace.

- “My God...” he mumbled.

3. "There's a phone call for you"

Even though Hopper had ordered her to stay on the couch and take it easy until he got back, El couldn't help but to think about the last thing he'd said before leaving for work that morning.

- "And yes. You asked me earlier if Mike's in town. He is."

Her heart fluttered as she repeated the words in her head. "He's here", she thought to herself, "he's really here". She was so excited she could barely contain herself. Hopper didn't really expect her to stay here all day, knowing that Mike was just at arms' length- right? She waited nine years for this day, but another second would be unbearable.

She put the dishes in the sink and went to the bathroom to take a shower and brush her teeth. Luckily Hopper had an unopened package of toothbrushes, so she could freely choose which color she wanted. She picked the blue one, since it reminded her of the sky. She was let out in an enclosed area every now and then back in the lab, to make sure she got a daily dose of fresh air to keep her healthy. She often let her eyes wander across the sky, trying to imagine what her friends from Hawkins might be doing.

As she brushed her teeth she studied her reflection in the mirror. Her skin was a pale, olive-ish tone that brought out the warmth from her hazel-brown eyes in a nice way, she thought. The people at the lab had finally let her hair grow out, so now it reached just below her shoulders. It was chestnut brown and slightly wavy.

She finished brushing her teeth, got dressed in the same clothes she wore the night before, borrowed one of Hopper's jackets (which was way too big for her, but she liked it) and headed out. Her body felt weary and her legs trembled slightly as she walked, but she didn't care. She was in too good a mood to let anything bother her.

After a while she started to recognize her surroundings. A lot had changed in the past nine years, but much was still the same in a way. She studied the tall buildings around her and tried to remember what the town had looked like when she was here last. With her head in the clouds she almost didn't hear when a woman called her name.

- "El? Eleven? Is that you?"

She turned around to find a familiar, if slightly older, face looking at her with surprise in her eyes.

- "Joyce?" El exclaimed as she ran up to her and threw her arms around her in a welcomed hug. "Joyce!" she repeated.

The two women laughed, eyes all teared up, as they took a step back to look at each other.

- "You're so grown up!" Joyce cheered, "and so beautiful- wow!"

El could feel her cheeks turning pink.

- "I can't believe you're here!" Joyce exclaimed. "Are you hungry? Let's go home and I'll make you something to eat!"

El nodded eagerly. Apparently her memories of Hawkins weren't as clear as she'd thought, and the fact that so much had changed made it even more difficult for her to find her way around. Maybe Joyce could help her get to the Wheeler's house. It couldn't hurt to get some food either; it was a few hours ago since she'd eaten the Eggos Hopper had prepared for her and she was starting to get hungry again.

On the way to the Byer's house, Joyce asked all the same questions as Hopper had that morning and El gave all the same answers. Joyce let out a sigh of frustration.

- "The things you've had to go through... I can't even imagine what it must've been like for you." she sounded rueful. "You're such an amazing young girl. You're so strong and I'm so incredibly proud of you."

El smiled. She was thankful for this warm-hearted woman. She didn't know her very well, in fact she hardly knew her at all, and still Joyce Byers was one of the kindest people she had ever met.

They arrived at their destination and El helped Joyce with the groceries she had brought back from town.

- "Will! Will, are you there honey?" she called out to the seemingly empty house as they entered. "Could you come here for a second, there's someone I want you to meet!"

A tall, slender young man came out from one of the bedrooms and looked skeptically at his mother and El as he approached them.

- "Uhm, hi. I'm Will" he said shyly while reaching his hand out for El.

- "This is Eleven." Joyce explained, "the girl who helped find you

when you were, you know..." she struggled to say the word. "Missing."

Will's eyes widened as he looked from his mother to El.

- "El" she smiled, shaking his hand.

- "You're Eleven?" El nodded in response, "Wow, I've heard so much about you... I just... What you did... Thank you. For everything."

She decided she liked Will very much. He seemed to be a lot like her. Quiet and observing, rather than very social and outgoing. He had very nice facial features, a sharp jaw and cheekbones, but the eyes were big and mild and his eyelashes long and beautiful. He was a pretty boy, she thought, slightly feminine but very handsome. Shy, but funny. Easy to talk to, she realized, as they helped Joyce prepare the lunch.

- "Do you want me to call Mike?" Will asked after a while. "Dustin and Lucas aren't here yet, but I think they're coming too next weekend. But I can call Mike! I'm sure he'll be more than happy to see you."

El's face turned into an enormous smile.

- "Yes! Please!"

Her stomach got filled with butterflies, but suddenly she felt a flash of nervousness run through her body. What if he for some reason didn't want to see her? Or worse- had forgotten all about her? It was a long time ago after all, and just because she hadn't been able to meet a lot of new people and gain more positive experiences didn't mean he hadn't. Maybe his memories of her had gotten replaced by something better? Will noticed the anxiety that had suddenly hit her and put his hand on her shoulder.

- "He'll be thrilled" he said, reassuringly, before going to the other side of the room where the phone hung on the wall.

- "Mike, there's a phone call for you!" Karen shouted from the hall. Shortly after, Mike came running down the stairs and took the phone from his mother hands.

- "Mike speaking." he said to the phone.

- "Mike! It's Will! Listen- you HAVE to come over here. Right now. I don't care if you're busy, just come over!"

It was unusual to hear Will sound so determined. He was usually rather soft spoken. There was a time when he barely spoke at all, a couple of months after he'd returned from the Upside down. His therapist explained that he suffered from PTSD and that he needed to be treated accordingly if he was ever going to recover. Of course she hadn't actually believed him when he finally opened up about the Upside down and the demogorgon, instead she claimed it was a coping mechanism from being kidnapped, but that didn't really matter. The treatment seemed to be working and Will slowly started coming back to his old self. He still went to therapy though, and probably would for the rest of his life.

- "Come over? Right now? Why?" Mike asked frowning.

- "I can't tell you. Just get your butt in the car and come here! Over and out!"

Will hung up, leaving Mike more confused than ever. Obediently he went to tell his girlfriend and parents that something was up with Will and that he needed to leave the house for a bit. Neither seemed to mind, so he got in his car and drove to the Byers' house.

It was only a couple of minutes to drive, but that was apparently enough time for Mike to worry about what could've happened to Will. Once there, he walked with troubled steps across the yard towards the front door, on which he knocked carefully.

- "Will, are you there? It's Mike!" he told the closed door in front of him. He could hear people whispering from behind it, seemingly unable to agree on who should be the one to answer him. The whispering suddenly stopped and the door opened.

On the other side stood a girl, kind of tall and gangly. She was clearly malnourished, but beautiful nonetheless. It took him less than a second to know who she was, but wide-eyed he stood silently for what could only be described as an eternity. A thousand memories flashed before his eyes at the same time and he struggled to find the right words, any words really, to say.

Will, being the observant boy he was, quickly took notice of this, walked up to the blushing people by the door and gently pushed

Eleven to take a step forward.

- "Come on now, given everything I've heard about you, I'm sure you're happy to see each other?"

That gentle push must've broken the spell, for not a second later did Mike and Eleven find themselves holding the other tightly in their arms.

Mike had dreamt about this moment ever since he lost her and often woke up in the middle of the night with a strong sense of guilt and loss and with tears in his eyes. This wasn't just another dream though; this was reality. It didn't feel like it, he almost felt like he was floating- but this really was reality.

To his surprise, however, he found that the floating feeling wasn't just in his head. He and the fragrant girl (who had buried pretty her face in the black, long wavy hair by his neck, he blushed once he realized this,) were literally floating a few inches off the ground.

- "Wow!" he exclaimed, with tears in his eyes and a smile on his face. El soon realized what she was doing and softly put them back on the ground before taking a step back; without really letting go of him. He dried a few tears that had escaped down his freckled cheek and looked her deeply in the eyes. The trembling sensation of weariness she had felt earlier was nothing compared to what she was experiencing now. Oh, how she had missed those almost pitch black eyes.

- "I can't believe it's... it's actually you." he whispered. "You're... you're back."

Without saying another word, he took her in his arms once again and held her tightly. If he could help it, *he wouldn't let her go ever again.*

4. "I feel tip-top"

Mike found it both weird and surprisingly natural to have El back in his life. Not seeing her for more than nine years would make you think that things might be a little awkward and quiet at first, but it was quite the opposite. As soon as the initial shock had subsided, everything seemed to go back to where they left off as kids; as if someone had just clicked unpause.

What was weird, however, was how extremely aware Mike suddenly became of himself. He didn't really have any problem coming up with things to say, he was as talkative as always- but what the hell did he normally do with his body when he talked to someone? Should he cross his legs? No, too uncomfortable. Rest his head in his hands? No, that probably looked stupid. Lean forward on the chair? Backwards? Nope. Nothing seemed natural about the way he moved and it made him frustrated. Something about El made his body stiff and weird and no matter how much he tried to- he just couldn't seem to relax.

His odd behavior could have something to do with the way her eyes glittered when she gazed at him, he thought. Or wait. No. Hold on a second. Why would he care about her eyes? Sure, they were just about the prettiest eyes he had ever seen, but- ... no. What was he thinking? Hannah's eyes were prettiest, he told himself. Of course – his girlfriend! He gave himself a mental punch in the face and El noticed how he started to drift off into space.

- "Are you okay...?" she asked, with her brown sparkling eyes once again finding their way deep into his.

- "Pretty..." he exhaled and instantly realized he'd actually said that out loud. "I mean!! What?? Yeah? I'm pretty good! I mean, why wouldn't I be? I feel tip-top!!!"

Every single drop of blood in his entire body must have rushed to his face, given the sudden redness of it. "*Tip-top*", he repeated. He might as well kill himself right now. Will, who knew Mike well, was sitting back and enjoying the very amusing scenery of his friend making a complete fool of himself. Mike maybe didn't know, but it was very clear to Will what was going on.

Will looked over at El who had started yawning discreetly- in hope that no one would notice how tired she actually was. The last few days had really taken a toll on her and she almost felt like taking a nap, even though it wasn't even passed two in the afternoon. She had no intention of leaving yet though, being with Will and (especially) Mike felt more important than sleep- so she tried to keep a straight face. Will decided to help her. Maybe she just needed a break.

- "Do you guys think we could watch a movie or something? I'm feeling a little light-headed..." he lied. "I found the latest Terminator-movie in town the other day, maybe we could watch that? I still haven't seen it."

Both Mike and Eleven released a sigh of relief to Will's suggestion. Mike; because watching a movie would mean he didn't have to focus so much on El (or rather being nervous about her focusing on him, now that he was being such a weirdo), and Eleven; because then maybe she'd get a chance to close her eyes for a few seconds.

- "Yeah, sounds good!" they said simultaneously.

- "I just need to go to the bathroom real quick" Mike added and his friends nodded understandingly.

Once back from the bathroom (where he'd basically just splashed cold water in his face and repeated to himself to "get a grip" about a hundred times) El was sitting by the end of the couch, waiting for her friends to get ready. Will put the movie in the VCR, then turned around to go sit next to Eleven. Mike and Will met eyes, as if facing each other in a duel. Mike suddenly panicked and hurried over to the couch; just in time to take the seat next to El before Will did. El was too exhausted to notice what was going on, but Will gave him a teasing glare and Mike's gaze quickly fell to the floor- his cheeks heating up to a thousand degrees once again.

It didn't take him very long to realize that insisting on sitting next to her was a terrible idea. He had been hoping to keep focus on the movie, which he had kind of been looking forward to seeing, but with the couch being so small; all he could think about was Eleven sitting tightly beside him, their bodies touching from knee to shoulder. It bothered him somehow, though he refused to admit to himself exactly why that was. Still he got a little bit disappointed anytime she moved in a way that broke the contact between them.

He was getting desperate for a distraction and somehow started thinking about his girlfriend, Hannah. They met for the first time a bit more than a year ago, but didn't start dating until six months of hanging out as friends. He had noticed from the start that she probably liked him more than just as a friend, but something had stopped him from actually doing anything about it. She was pretty, he'd recognized that from the moment they met. She was smart, funny and just easy to be around. He should be head over heels for this girl, he knew that, but something was stopping him from giving himself to her completely. Something he was too ashamed to admit, because he should've let go a very long time ago; and that something was sitting next to him.

He shook his head slightly, as if it would help him clear it, and did what he always did when his mind started to wander in that direction; tried to convince himself otherwise. The fact that a girl, whom he had only known for a week when he was twelve, still held a crucial piece of his heart just sounded ridiculous to him. Surely he was imagining things, building them up in his head simply to keep himself from being truly happy. People did that to themselves, he knew that. Created drama whenever things seemed too good to be true. How could he possibly have such strong feelings for someone he technically barely even knew? The answer was easy: he couldn't.

Still his heart melted the second he felt El's head suddenly lay on his shoulder. She was too close now; still he desperately wanted her closer. It was like staying away from a drug you'd spent a lot of effort getting sober from. The closer she got, the more dangerous it became—as it woke up a sleeping craving inside of Mike that he had almost forgotten he had. The memories from the night in the gym at Hawkins middle came barging into his head as he looked down on the sleeping girl on his shoulder; and just like that night— he suddenly felt the urge to kiss her. But he didn't. Yet he couldn't resist letting his hand slowly and discreetly find its way closer to hers – until it was close enough for both of their little fingers to gently brush against each other. His heart fluttered at the touch and an adorable smile appeared on his face as he slowly turned his gaze to the tv where a man-looking machine was in full swing to shoot at his archenemy.

Will glanced at the two people beside him, and though it stung a little to see Mike Wheeler get so flustered about someone else; he decided he preferred seeing him with El over seeing him with Hannah.

El, he told himself, seemed like a more worthy opponent.

5. "Is it Mike?"

Hawkins; December 18th, 1992

A bit more than a week had passed since El's return, when she started noticing a strange change of behavior in Mike Wheeler. At first he had seemed excited to see her; always kept close, sat next to her when he could, talked until her ears almost got sore and told her in detail about his day. Always smiling, always laughing. Always blushing. But over the course of the last few days all of that had suddenly changed. Instead Mike had become distant and seemingly avoided her. Eleven was confused.

- "El? Are you listening? Is something wrong?" asked a soft voice, coming from a wide-eyed Will Byers. El quickly came back from her thoughts.

- "Sorry..." she said. "It's nothing. You were saying?"

- "Oh, come on, El!" Will tried. "I may not know you as well as the other guys, but something's obviously bothering you."

El fell silent and looked down at her hands. Will watched the skinny girl at the other side of his kitchen table with concern in his eyes. He suddenly realized what was going on.

- "Is it Mike?" he asked gingerly. El nodded. "Yeah, he's been acting kinda strange lately, hasn't he?"

El sighed, as if all the air inside of her had to exit her body in order for her to say a single word.

- "Yes..." she fell back to silence. "I have a feeling it's my fault."

Will frowned.

- "Your fault? Why?"

- "I don't know. Maybe it was something I said. Or something I did. Or didn't." she debated. "He won't even look at me anymore. I'm scared, Will... What if he realized he doesn't like me?"

Will struggled with finding the right words. Sure- Mike had started acting weird right after she showed up, but Will knew for a fact that Mike cared very deeply for this girl. When Will had returned from the Upside down, Mike made sure to use any opportunity to talk about her; so much that Will almost felt as if he too had been there with them during that week. Surely he couldn't dislike her all of a sudden?

- “Maybe it’s just something going on with his family? I mean, Christmas is coming up soon. Maybe he’s just stressed out about that. He never really liked coming back here, you know.” Will tried.

_ “I don’t know, Will...” El was not convinced. “I just feel as if he’d tell us if that was the case. I’m pretty sure it’s me... He doesn't seem to avoid you?”

The conversation was interrupted by impatient knocks on the front door.

- “Ey, Byers! Let us in!” Dustin shouted.

_ “Yeah, we wanna see our girl!” Lucas added.

El almost flew out of her seat as she ran to open the door; after which she threw herself in the arms of the two boys standing on the other side of it.

- “El!!” they both laughed as they wrapped their arms around her.

Once they all took a step back and the boys made their way into the house, El noticed the previously mentioned black haired boy that had been standing behind Dustin and Lucas. She suddenly became unsure.

- “Hi, Mike...” she said carefully, anxiously smiling.

He nodded and gave her a forced smile in response before walking passed her in the doorway. El sighed hopelessly.

They all went to sit down by the kitchen table. Lucas and Dustin asked a million questions about the years El was missing and she obediently answered.

She was getting used to telling this story by now and had come to use the same words that she'd carefully picked out, as to make it as interesting and accurate as she possibly could. The boys looked at her in awe- all except Mike who didn’t seem to look at anything at all. His stare was stuck on the table in front of them and for a second El wondered if he had even blinked since they sat down. Something inside of her chest felt heavy as she looked at him, so she decided to focus on the others instead. It soon became Lucas' and Dustin's turn to fill her in on their (according to her) exciting adventures since they last saw each other. They told her about high school, girlfriends, pranks and sleepovers. They told her about college, working extra jobs and how they all met Hannah.

Hannah. El hadn't met her yet, but it didn't take long after her arrival before she learned the name. Apparently Hannah was a pretty looking girl, funny and witty. El knew that she probably would like her if they were ever to meet, but she felt somewhat reluctant to that idea. El glanced at Mike. She didn't really feel like meeting this character at all.

Two hours had passed when Mike finally spoke.

- "I need to get going. I told mom I'd be home for dinner." he said bluntly as he started to make his way towards the front door. The rest of the group looked puzzled.

- "O-kay...?" Dustin frowned.

- "See you."

And so he was gone.

The remaining boys looked at each other with raised eyebrows; while El still had her eyes glued to the door.

- "What's up with him?" Lucas asked.

Will shrugged.

- "I don't know man. I think it might be Hannah. Only love makes a man that troubled. Maybe she's dumping him or something?" Dustin replied. "But it's weird how he's so grumpy about it. You'd think that would make things easier for him..."

- "Yeah..." Will and Lucas agreed, nodding slowly.

The three boys simultaneously turned to look at El, who was finally able to take her eyes off the door to look at her company. Her eyes widened in confusion when she noticed the sudden attention she was given.

- "What..?"

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm so sorry for taking so long with this! Hopefully I'll start with the next chapter soon so you won't have to wait as long...

6. "I'm so sorry, El..."

Hawkins, December 20th 1992

- "Isn't that Will's sweater?"

That was the first thing Mike Wheeler said to El after already having had her and the boys over for about two hours. The group of friends were together in the Wheeler's kitchen making various kinds of Christmas treats; a tradition they'd started a few years ago that they were glad to share with their no longer missing girl. She absolutely loved everything about it; all but one thing that seemed to distract her.

When she realized Mike was talking to her, she stopped staring at his girlfriend, which she had discreetly (she hoped) done since their introduction. Instead she turned to look at the messy haired boy who was, for the first time that evening, standing beside her.

- "Huh? Oh! Uhm... Yeah, I told him I liked it when he was wearing it the other day and he kinda said I could have it so..." she replied shyly. Mike simply nodded thoughtfully, his face completely blank and unreadable, as he grabbed the package of sugar standing next to her and then immediately returned to his original post; right next to his precious girlfriend.

El sighed and continued decorating her gingerbread man with green icing. Regardless of what the boys had said the other day, she sure couldn't see any signs of them being even remotely close to breaking up. To El it seemed like quite the opposite; they were teasing, giggling and touching each other all the time and El felt a strong sense of defeat.

- "You okay..?" asked a low, soft voice. El looked up at Will. He bumped her shoulder with his and looked at her with a loving, yet concerned grin on his face.

- "Yeah, I'm fine." she lied and smiled slightly. She knew she could trust him with the truth, but decided it wasn't worth talking about right now. The last thing she wanted was to ruin their tradition with

her stupid love related problems. She'd just have to suck it up. "I'm good, really!"

Will raised an eyebrow and looked skeptically at her gingerbread man who was now completely covered in icing.

- "Yeah, I can see that." he said teasingly, before he dipped his finger in the green goo and put it on El's nose with an endearing giggle.

- "Hey!!" El protested laughing, and did the same to him.

The war was soon in motion and the two managed to smear icing all over each other's faces before an annoyed voice pierced their amused laughter.

- "Could you guys not?!"

Both immediately stopped what they were doing and turned stiffly to look at Mike, who was staring at them, horribly grouchy.

- "Sorry, Mike. We were just joking around..." Will tried quietly.

- "Yeah, well maybe you should stop acting like lovestruck ten year olds in other people's kitchen? You're making a mess."

The entire room was quiet now. Everybody had stopped what they were doing, in shock after Mike's unexpected outburst.

- "Dude, that was uncalled for." Lucas protested. "They were just joking! Besides- the only thing that got messy is their faces."

- "Yeah man, what's up with you?" Dustin added.

Hannah looked at Mike with confusion in her eyes.

- "Mike, sweetie..."

Mike's jaw tensed as he looked down at the table for a few seconds before looking up at El; staring her right in the eyes. He looked so cold she felt a shiver down her spine.

- "Sorry. I guess I overreacted." he said, completely emotionless.

Another hour went by and the group of friends tried their best to recreate the great mood they all had before; but with Mike still sulking it was a struggle. El was too distracted, but Will quickly noticed that everytime he got closer to El, Mike could not stop staring, and as soon as Will stepped away- Mike continued with what he was doing as if nothing had happened. Was he jealous? Will wanted to try this theory.

- "Hey, El!" he exclaimed before wrapping his arms around her in a warm embrace. El chuckled softly and hugged him back. They let go after a couple of seconds.

- "What was that for?" El asked with a bright smile painted across her face. Will glanced at Mike who was looking at them with eyes wider than those of a deer in the headlights. So it's confirmed, Will thought.

- "I'm just so glad that you're with us, El. That I've finally gotten to know you!"

El smiled and stroked his arm.

- "I'm glad I finally got to know you too, Will!"

Mike turned away with an annoyed sigh, instead facing the window.

- "Are you okay, honey?" Hannah asked, puzzled. "You've been acting kinda weird all night..."

- "What? Oh, no, I just thought I heard something... outside..." he forced a smile and leaned over to kiss his girlfriend on the cheek. He then looked outside the window again, with eyes attached to something far away in the distance.

Hannah wasn't convinced by his explanation and looked over at the brown haired girl on the other side of the counter. El and Will had returned to their duties. She looked at her boyfriend again. He used to be troubled when they got back here, sure, but this was completely different.

El started laughing at something Will had said and Hannah noticed how Mike almost instinctively turned around to look at them, as if to make sure they weren't doing something he didn't want- whatever

that might be. She didn't really want to understand why he looked so tormented looking at his two friends standing close to one another, having fun in the other's company- but deep down she already did.

Another hour and a half passed when Will declared that he needed to go home. Most of the baking was done by then and though Mike refused to admit it- he was strangely happy to see his best friend leave. Seeing Will with El like that had been so weird to him. So wrong somehow. Mike loved Will with all his heart, but something about tonight just made him want to punch a hole in the wall.

Shortly after Will had left, Dustin and Lucas decided to do the same; leaving Mike, El and Hannah alone in the kitchen to clean up. The atmosphere was tense and conversation forced. Mike didn't really say much, but Hannah was desperate to relieve some of the pressure.

"So El, where did you say you were from?" she asked with genuine curiosity. El glanced in panic at Mike who had also reacted to the question and decided to step in.

"Uhh she's from Sweden!" he quickly replied in El's place, while she was looking like she had seen a ghost; just nodding to confirm Mike's statement. "Yeah, Sweden!"

"Oh wow, that's cool." Hannah gave her a warm smile. "I actually have an uncle who moved there a few years ago. I've been meaning to visit him, but I'm not a big fan of airplanes so..."

El just nodded slowly and nervously as she started to collect the different utensils they'd been using and put it all in the sink for washing.

"Have you ever been to Tjörn? Apparently that's where my uncle lives with his wife now. It's on the west coast, but you probably knew that already haha..." Hannah looked at El with sparkles in her eyes. El was so nervous she couldn't seem to find a single word to say.

"You're from the east coast though, aren't you El?" Mike saved her again.

"Uhm, yeah. Yeah! The east coast." El replied.

"Oh, so like Stockholm?" Hannah asked with a smile. "I've heard it's beautiful there!"

El forced a smiled back.

- "Yeah, it's... okay I guess. I prefer Hawkins though." At least half of that was true.

Hannah laughed.

- "Really? You're from the capital of Sweden and you prefer this place? Wow, who would've known."

- "Well..." El began calmly. "What can I say? It just feels more like home here."

She had looked at Mike while saying that last part. Their eyes met for a second before he turned away so that she wouldn't see his face, but she was certain she'd seen him blush.

- "Yeah, I guess I understand though. Living in a big city can be stressful. Hawkins always seems so nice and quiet. Like nothing really ever happens here. Right, honey?" Hannah turned to her boyfriend.

- "Uhm, yeah. Sure. Nothing." he lied. Lots of things had happened here, El and Mike both knew that. Hannah, however, was completely clueless. He looked at El again and gave her half a smile with eyebrows frowning before turning away again.

A minute later, El turned the water on in the sink to drown the sound of Hannah and Mike starting to giggle and whisper to each other. She tried hard to focus on the dishes when her gut suddenly told her to glance at the couple standing about fourteen feet to her right.

Once she turned her head towards them she could feel the pain of a thousand knives hitting her in her chest. It was all a matter of seconds, but one second was more than enough to make her want to throw up from anxiety.

She'd never seen someone kiss in real life before; only in the movies they'd let her watch back in the lab. El had been so fascinated by it, remembering that night Mike had done the same to her back in the school. Seeing people kiss in movies made her heart warm. Seeing Mike kiss her in her memories made her heart almost explode, because El had learned what it meant by now. It was something you shared with the one you are in love with.

Her heart stung so badly she had to look away. That meant that Mike had been in love with her once.

So seeing him kiss another girl, no matter how swiftly, made her want to disappear; much like the night she fought the Demogorgon.

Mike was in love with Hannah now. Not her.

She felt her jaw starting to shake and burning tears in her eyes that wanted nothing but to run down her cheeks- but she stubbornly pushed them back. It didn't matter how hurt she was- she couldn't let Mike and Hannah see her cry. It would be too weird. How would she even explain that?

Instead she carefully dried her hands on the towel beside her, quietly excused herself and hurried to the bathroom. Mike looked at her back with wide eyes as she left.

-"E-El..?"

Once in the bathroom, locked and secured, El leaned her back against the door and slowly slid down towards the floor the same way her tears finally started pushing their way over her eyelids. She sobbed heavily.

This was so incredibly stupid. Why was she even like this? Why was HE like this? Why couldn't she just be happy to have him around; as her friend? Why did she have to care so much about who he kissed and who he didn't?

She gave herself a mental kick as she desperately dried the tears with the sleeve of Will's sweater. After sitting on the bathroom floor for about five minutes, doing the best she could to calm down, she finally stood up to splash some cold water on her face from the basin.

The reflection in the mirror in front of her showed a somewhat red-eyed girl with messy brown hair and no make up. In her own eyes, she wasn't even close to being pretty. How could she ever compete with someone like Hannah? Hannah was smart, funny and extremely beautiful. El was none of those things; at least in her own opinion.

Why would she ever even think Mike would be interested in a

socially incompetent, ugly, experiment lab rat like herself? That was all she was- an experiment. Maybe she would've been better off if she'd just stayed in the lab where people treated her for what she was and didn't feed her dreams and hopes of what she wanted to be. Her powers were all she was. Her powers were all she had. How could she have lied to herself like this?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a soft knock on the door.

- "El, are you all right?" Hannah asked, worried. Why did this girl have to be so nice too? She made it completely impossible for El to dislike her- no matter how much she wanted to.

El gave her reflection one last look and sighed, desperately trying to hold back her quiet sobbing.

- "Yeah, I'll be out in a second."

Footsteps were then heard, but slowly faded- suggesting that Hannah had gone back to Mike in the kitchen. El took one final breath before opening the bathroom door to join them.

- "I... I think I'm gonna head home now." El said as she walked into the kitchen, her eyes glued to the floor. "I'm starting to get tired."

- "Wait, you're gonna walk?" Mike asked astonished.

- "Yeah... I could use some fresh air." El replied, doing everything she could to hide the sadness in her voice. She was uncertain if her attempts were successful or not. She decided they probably wasn't.

- "Don't be ridiculous, I'll drive you." Mike protested.

- "It's fine, really. I can walk-" she tried before Hannah joined the protests.

- "But it's freezing outside! You should let him take you."

- "Not to mention, Hopper's place is pretty far." Mike added. "I'm driving you."

- "It's fine, really. I'm staying at Will's now anyways, so it's not that far..."

- "It's still cold as hell!" Mike argued.

- "But..."

- "No 'but'. Come on, let's go." he said firmly and put a hand on her back to lead her to the hallway.

The ride over to Byers was quiet and awkward. Once Mike pulled over by their destination, both sat in silence for a while. El glanced over at Mike, who seemed to be contemplating something.

- "I'm so sorry, El..." it was Mike who broke the ice.

- "Sorry? About what..?" El asked confused, her heart beating fast from being in his presence. Mike sighed.

- "I know I've been acting weird around you lately and you don't deserve that but..." He looked at his hands, holding the steering wheel.

El had trouble breathing now. What was he trying to say?

- "But... what?" she asked gingerly, with a look of worry glowing from her eyes. Mike remained quiet for a second, his face full of remorse for what he was about to say.

- "I don't think I can keep seeing you anymore." he almost whispered. "At least not without the guys..."

El looked down at her hands. She'd been right. He didn't like her.

- "Oh... okay..." she said, almost choking on the anxiety that was building up in her chest and throat. She quietly unbuckled her seatbelt, opened the car door and attempted to get out when Mike grabbed her arm in panic.

- "El, no wait!! I-..." he exclaimed and she sat back down without looking at him. That didn't keep him from seeing the tears that had started falling down her beautiful cheeks. His body felt numb. What was he doing? "I'm so sorry..."

- "Good bye, Mike..." she whispered.

El stood up once again, wiped the tears from her cheeks and closed the door behind her.

Mike stayed in the car with his mouth slightly open. "Good bye, Mike...". The nightmare-like memories from his childhood flashed before his eyes as her words echoed in his head. His heart sank all the way down to the bottom of the ocean and tears started falling as El disappeared behind the closing front door to the Byer's house.

He suddenly felt his entire body fill with anger. All the way from his toes, out in his arms, legs and to his head like a wave of fury. With his heart racing faster than that of a rabbit's, he started hitting the steering wheel in front of him as he cursed loudly at himself. Never in his life had he felt such self-hatred as he did right now. How could it have come to this? How did he end up here? He'd hurt her. El was crying because of him. How could he be such an IDIOT??

As he stopped punishing the steering wheel for his mistakes, still crying like he hadn't in years, he realized something. He couldn't let it end like this. It just couldn't.

Something had to be done.

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow okay so I believe this is the longest chapter so far. Sorry for keeping you waiting!

Things are about to go down, so you better buckle up~~

I might change some things in this chapter in the future, but I really wanted to upload this for you all anyways. Hope you like it!

7. "Then so am I."

Notes for the Chapter:

A chapter with a twist~

Hawkins, December 21 1992

It was with boiling fury in his steps that Will marched to the Wheeler's house the next day. Will Byers was usually a kind, understanding young man and had been so since he was a little kid; especially when it came to Michael Wheeler, but today he felt very different.

When El had come home last night, something inside of Will had broken when he saw the salty tears falling down her rosy cheeks as she ran towards his brother's old room, that had now become hers. It was clear to him that she wanted to hide- revealing her true emotions was something she'd gotten used to not doing; but he had followed her to her new room nonetheless, demanding that she told him what had happened. And so she did.

Will knocked so hard on the front door that his hand almost hurt, but truth to be told- he was too upset to notice. A few seconds went by before he could hear the sound of movement from the other side of the door, until it finally opened and revealed a very lost-looking Wheeler boy.

-"Will? What are you doing he-.."

-"Why do you have to be such an asshole? What did she do to deserve that?" Will didn't even let him finish his question. Mike winced slightly.

-"W-what?"

-"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about, Michael!"

Looking into those dark, chocolate eyes always made Will feel weak in the knees, but he was determined not to let this idiotic boy make

him waver this time. He knew he didn't stand a chance with him, he wasn't stupid, and as much as that hurt- he wouldn't just stand by and watch as his best friend threw away a girl that could possibly be the love of his life. That just didn't seem very best friend-like to him.

- "How could you tell her you don't wanna be around her anymore?"

- "I didn't say that..." Mike interjected quietly.

- "You've been talking about her for nine years! God damn it, Michael, I knew exactly what she looked like and I'd never met her or even seen a photo of her before. And she suddenly arose from the dead just a few weeks ago- and now you won't talk to her?"

Mike was in shock. Never in his life had he seen Will this upset. Never had Will so much as raised his voice, not even when Troy and James pestered them day in and day out while they were kids. Lucas and Mike lost their temper sometimes; hell, even Dustin who was always smiling and joking had yelled at their bullying demons- but Will was always calm and mature about it. He took the hits (both physical and verbal) without flinching.

So when he now found that very same boy standing in front of him, a very serious look on his face, raising his voice in anger, calling him by his real name (which no one really ever did)- Mike knew for sure he had fucked up. Royally.

- "Could we take this outside? Everyone's inside and I'm afraid we'll disturb the neighbours... Take a walk with me?"

Will was flustered, but nodded angrily. Mike grabbed his jacket and followed the shorter boy out on the street, away from the neighbourhood- towards the woods. When Will assessed they were far enough away he continued his scolding.

- "You know what she's been through, you jerk!" he exclaimed. She needs you more than ever and what do you do? You dismiss her completely. Dick-move, Wheeler!"

Mike found himself at a loss for words. Will was right, of course he was right; but Mike's feelings had gotten the best of him. Mike was an intelligent guy; he loved reading and learning. School had been like a playground for him. But whenever things became too close, too

personal and emotional- Mike was so utterly stupid and clueless. When he felt too much- his brain seemed to shut down and this clumsy, thoughtless version of him took over. Like an evil twin, or a strange clone.

- "If you like her that much, why do you keep pushing her away? I don't get it! If it were me you dismissed, I'd understand, but-..."

- "Hold on a second!" Mike suddenly returned from his cloud-wandering. "Why on earth would I dismiss you?"

- "Uhm, I mean-..."

- "Will, what's going on? Did something happen? Wait, did something happen between you and El??" Mike sounded worried. "Shit shit shit, I knew it... Did you kiss??"

- "No, no! It's not like that at all... it's just..." he couldn't get himself to finish that sentence.

- "Just what? Tell me, Will!"

- "I can't... You'll hate me and never want to see me again, I can't risk that..."

Mike looked at him seriously. What the hell was he talking about?

- "Will, you're making me worried... Please just tell me what's going on?"

Will still hesitated. Coming clean about this meant he was putting their entire friendship on the line. He had been successfully hiding this from Mike for years now- how could he tell him? Everything would change.

- "You'll think I'm disgusting..."

- "Disgusting? What are you talking about? Will, just tell me." Mike pleaded. "Come o-..."

- "I'm in love with you."

There. He'd said it. All he could do now was wait for his doom.

Mike stood completely still and stared at his friend with eyes wide open.

- "What..?!" he sounded so shocked, he hadn't expected this at all. "Are you joking? Because it's not funny!"

Will shook his head.

- "I'm not joking..."

Mike was completely quiet for a moment.

- "So..." he began. "So you and El... There's nothing going on between you two?"

Will shook his head and felt a slight burning in his eyes from the tears that had started building up. The enormous amount of pressure from having told his deepest secret came rushing over him, as if he was nothing but a tiny jolly-boat on a raging sea. A fiery tear ran down his cheek. Then another, and another. He struggled to breathe now, afraid that the tension and anxiety he'd built up would swallow him whole.

"I'm just a fag, queer, fairy or whatever you wanna call me..." he mouthed between his tearfilled breaths. "And I know you're not like me, not a disgusting boy who likes boys like I do... I'm so stupid for even feeling this way, but I just can't stop..!"

Mike could do nothing but look at him, mouth half-open, as reality started to sink in. In his head he went through any and every memory he could find of the two interacting, searching for signs where he should've noticed. Searching for situations where he might have unknowingly led Will on. He should've known. How could he not have known?

The silence was starting to get a bit too much for Will's nervously beating heart and he felt as if his stomach was about to turn inside out.

- "I'm sorry... I shouldn't have told you. I'm gonna go!" he blurted out as he quickly turned around to escape this hell.

- "No, Will wait!" Mike took a few steps after him, grabbed his shoulder and forced him to turn back to face him. "Let me just ask you something." he looked serious. "How would you know if I'm straight?"

Will flinched.

- "What are you talking about? You have a girlfriend? I've only ever heard you talk about girls like that?" he said in disbelief.

Mike sighed and crossed his arms.

- "Close your eyes."

Will stared at him with eyebrows frowning and eyes squinting. He shook his head, confused.

- "Wh-what?"

- "Close them."

He did.

- "I don't want you reading too much into this right now, okay? Think of it as... as a Christmas gift!"

- "O-okay" Will said, eyes still closed.

There was nothing but silence between them for a while. All that could be heard was the distant sound of traffic and the wind playing around with the naked trees, somewhere above their heads. With his eyes shut, Will heard Mike take a step closer in the snow, before a hand softly grabbed his arm. His heart started pounding, like a wild horse galloping in his chest. What was Mike doing?

That's when he felt it. It was swift and gentle, gone almost as soon as it had come- but it had been there.

A kiss had been placed on the lips of Will Byers and he dared almost not open his eyes when it had gone, in fear of this all being a dream. He knew his cheeks were glowing red by now, since he felt burning hot all across his face, even to his ears. It was a strange, tingeling feeling.

- "You're not disgusting, okay?" Mike spoke softer than he had the entire time and Will decided it was probably safe to open his eyes. Their eyes met and Will could see that the beautiful boy before him was blushing too. "I'm so sorry I can't tell you what you want to hear. You're my best friend and I do love you, but not like that. I just want you to know that I'm not a jerk like that, understand? I would never stop hanging out with you because you like guys." he explained seriously. "I kissed you. So now, if anyone ever calls you disgusting or a fag, queer, fairy or whatever else- then so am I."

Will stared at his friends with tear-filled eyes and a shy smile gracing his lips. No wonder he'd fallen in love with this boy. It had been a kiss of pure friendship and solidarity. Not the kind of kiss Will

dreamed about, but it meant the world to him anyway.

- "To be completely honest..." Mike looked down at the ground for a few seconds before meeting Will's doe eyes. "I believe everyone's got an exception."

- "An exception?"

Mike sighed as he carefully thought about how to put this so it wouldn't sound stupid.

- "Yeah, like... if you like girls, there's a boy you could change for? Maybe some people never get to meet their exception, but I'm sure we all have one. Does that make any sense?"

He paused for a second, but Will just looked at him questioningly.

- "What I mean is- I'm in love with someone else and probably always will be, but..."

Will just stared at him and frowned.

- "W... what are you trying to say?"

Mike took a deep breath and smiled shyly.

- "You'd be my only exception, Will."

Notes for the Chapter:

Just to be clear! This is not going to turn into a Byeler-fic.

This kiss was simply an act of solidarity and support towards a friend, to show him he is not alone in this world and he is most definitely not disgusting. ~~

8. For the better.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm so sorry for taking so long to write this! There's been a lot going on in my life and I've been putting this off a little too long now.

Thanks to everyone who commented and encouraged me to continue- if not for you I probably would've just let this fic go. Hope you like where it's going!

If you don't really remember what happened before this- check out the previous chapter. I made some changes.

Hawkins, December 21 1992

- "I'm back!" Will shouted as he closed the front door behind him. El peeked out from her new bedroom. Joyce had convinced Hopper that it would be better for El to stay with them, since they had a room just waiting to be used. That and the fact that Hopper was working most of the time. The two adults figured that El probably needed some company after being so isolated and even though Joyce too worked a lot, Will was home most of the time.

Will noticed El looked a lot better than the night before, when she'd come home crying; but a few clues let Will understand that she wasn't exactly in the mood to face the world just yet. The fact that she was wearing her pyjamas past noon was one of them.

- "Where've you been..?" she asked sleepily. He didn't reply, but instead went to sit on the couch with a smirk painted across his face. He rested his feet on the small table in front of him and sighed contently. The boy he'd had a crush on for ages had kissed him just two hours earlier. The touch of Mike's lips still lingered on his and though Will now knew with absolute certainty that they would never be a thing, butterflies still fluttered in his chest. He hadn't been sure

how to feel about it at first- hearing Mike tell him he didn't feel the same. For a second the kiss filled him with what he knew was nothing but false hope, but he soon decided to try and let that go. He'd already known they would never be more than friends, this simply confirmed his suspicions. Instead he decided to be happy. The mission he'd assigned himself the night before, make his old friend open his eyes to what was going on in front of him, seemed successful. Now all Will had to do was pull some strings and push a few buttons here and there, take a step back and see what happened. El sat beside him on the couch.

- "What's with the smirk?"

- "Oh, nothing." Will lied, still smiling. "Just went for a walk in the woods. It's such a nice day, I'm just in a good mood!"

- "The sky is completely covered with grey clouds and the trees are almost lying down from the heavy wind." El responded in confusion. "I'd say this day is pretty *terrible*." Will shrugged and looked out the window.

- "I don't know. I have a feeling things will turn around for the better."

Will thought back to what Mike had said when they were out in the woods. "I'm in love with someone else and probably always will be". Something told him Mike was not talking about Hannah.

Over in the Wheeler household Mike had just joined his girlfriend in the kitchen. Hannah was in the middle of baking and the smell of cinnamon and apples filled the entire house. Mike pulled out a chair by the counter and sat down.

- "I think I need to tell you something." He looked serious, yet slightly spaced out. Hannah put down the dirty bowl she had in her hands and looked over at her boyfriend.

- "Yeah?" she smiled vaguely. Mike sighed and looked down at his hands.

- "I kissed Will." he finally said. Hannah froze.

- "You what..??" The smile quickly disappeared and a frown of confusion replaced it. "Am I missing something..?"

Mike looked up from his hands and met her eyes.

- "Oh, no! N-not like that!" he stuttered. "He's gay!"

Hannah shook her head, even more confused than before.

- "Is that supposed to resemble an explanation, 'cause I still really don't get it..? You kissed him because... he's gay?"

- "Uh, I mean... uhm... I just wanted him to know that I'm there for him, you know?" he tried.

- "I really don't."

- "I mean... He came out to me just now and I just... wanted him to understand that I support him and stuff."

The more Mike tried to explain it, the less sense it made but Hannah just laughed.

- "Do you usually kiss people to support them?" she asked teasingly.

- "Noo..." he mumbled as his cheeks turned pink.

- "No? Because I could use some support right now if these pies are gonna turn out any good."

Mike laughed and went over to help his girlfriend, but still had a sense of guilt running around in his chest. He remembered El's face from the night before and the smile on his lips was suddenly erased. Hannah looked up at him.

- "You okay, babe?" she asked softly.

- "Will's angry at me..." he confessed and started fidgeting with the measurements laying on the counter.

- "For kissing him? I don't get it..?"

So Mike told her about the night before, about feeling weird about having El around again since she reminded him of his childhood. He told her about the drive over to Byer's and how he told her he couldn't see her anymore. Hannah looked at him with deep concern. Mike had told her (very vaguely) when Hannah first met El about her and Mike knowing each other when they were kids. She knew El had suddenly disappeared (Hannah interpreted it as El abruptly had been forced to move away) and that it had been hard on the both of them, being such close friends. Apparently El had had a difficult childhood, living with a foster family in Sweden. Mike had told her they didn't really care for her and El had gone through a lot of emotional abuse- which explained her closed, shy and somewhat socially awkward character. Hannah felt sorry for her.

- "You are such an idiot" she exclaimed as she punched her boyfriend's arm.

- "Ow! What did you do that for??" he cried, rubbing his arm.

- "She obviously needs you! You said it yourself- she's had a horrible upbringing with lack of love and security. She needs you! I thought you were friends!" Hanna punched his arm again and continued: "I really don't get you. At first you act like a love-struck puppy around her and I don't know if I should be worried or not. But I realized that of course that kind of behavior would be natural- she was your best friend and you haven't seen her in nine years. Losing her must've been traumatizing for you, since I've never even heard about her until just now. But now, all of a sudden, you dismiss her and don't even want to be around her? What's your problem, man??"

Mike shrugged. He didn't have the words to explain what he was feeling. These past couple of weeks had been too much for him. At first, just being back in Hawkins seemed difficult. Since arriving, his entire world had turned upside down (he almost laughed at his own choice of words). Having Eleven around again was wonderful, heartwarming and thrilling. But at the same time it had woken

something inside of him that he was unable to identify. Now whenever she was close by, all he could feel was frustration. Seeing her around Will had almost made him... jealous? He needed time to figure things out, but time was apparently not something he had in abundance.

- "Invite her over for Christmas." Hannah demanded. "At least tell her she's welcome if she doesn't have any other plans. You clearly care about her- now go make things right!"

- "But I don't think mom-..." he began.

- "I'll talk to your mom. She'll be more than thrilled to have her over, I'm sure." she argued. "Now go!"

Of course she was right. For some reason everyone else always seemed to have a better idea about what he should do than Mike himself ever did. He picked up the phone and entered number to Joyce and Will Byers from memory before sighing and putting it to his ear.

- "Will? Yeah, it's Mike. Can you put El on the phone please..."